

## Types of Hatha Yoga

By Tiffany Twardowsky, MS

There are a number of branches of yoga (different methods of practicing postures, breathing techniques, meditation and yoga philosophy all working toward the same goal of uniting the mind with the body) such as the branches of a tree. These include Râja yoga, Karma yoga, Bhakti yoga, Jnana yoga, Tantra yoga and Hatha yoga. This article explains the different styles of Hatha yoga, the most popular yoga practice in the West.

Hatha yoga is the yoga of physical health and balance. In Sanskrit, "ha" translates into sun and "tha" into moon. The basis of Hatha yoga is bringing opposing yet complementary forces into balance. Control of the physical self is the path to enlightenment. In the West, Hatha yoga is used primarily for enhancing physical health, strength and endurance while stilling the mind and creating a feeling of relaxation.

There are several styles of Hatha yoga; many of these have specific characteristics that reflect the uniqueness of each teacher's yoga philosophy. Like individuals, styles or schools of Hatha yoga have their own personalities and beliefs toward practicing the disciplines of yoga. Distinguishing these styles are the differences in sequence, motion, alignment and overall form of the poses and the variations of breathing methods and meditation. Although the basics remain the same, the specific techniques that vary in approach outline the main differences among the many types. Regardless of age, fitness level or philosophy, there is a style for everyone interested in experiencing the physical and mental benefits of yoga. The following is a partial list of the many yoga styles.

Ananda yoga unites the physical with the spiritual. Incorporating gentle exercises that emphasize deep relaxation, this style is designed to liberate and energize the body in preparation for

meditation. Developed by Swami Kriyananda, through the teachings of Paramahansa Yogananda, Ananda yoga's main focus is a series of poses called "energization exercises". These exercises involve tensing and relaxing various muscles of the body, as well as breathing techniques to consciously direct energy (the body's life force) to different areas of the body.

The Ashtanga yoga system is a rigorous practice designed to strengthen and align the musculoskeletal system and balance the body's energy flow. Created by K. Pattabhi Jois, this system consists of 240 poses in six consecutive series; each pose linked by the breath. The most intensive form of Hatha yoga, its purpose is to create internal heat and energy flow to cleanse and detoxify the body. Ashtanga places equal emphasis on strength, flexibility and stamina. This style is often confused with "Power Yoga".

Designed to detoxify and cleanse the body, Bikram yoga is most often practiced in a well-heated room with temperatures pushing 100 degrees Fahrenheit. Classes consist of 26 challenging poses allowing students to develop muscle tone, balance and strength. Differing from Ashtanga yoga, there is more emphasis on holding poses and this type includes breathing exercises designed to produce an internal heat called tapas. Bikram Choudhury, who sequenced the traditional 26 Hatha yoga poses, designed the style.

Started by Swami Satchidananda, Integral yoga combines all the paths of yoga to benefit all aspects of the individual. The style unites postures, breathing exercises, selfless service, meditation, chanting, prayer and self-inquiry into one approach. Promoting peace and tolerance, this gentle, yet challenging style accentuates meditative practices over anatomical form. Sessions begin with 45 minutes of postures, followed by deep relaxation, breathing exercises and finally meditation. Participants of this school

are encouraged to strive towards "an easeful body, a peaceful mind, and a useful life." The class is a tranquil journey of stretching the body and calming the mind.

Iyengar yoga is probably the most practiced type of Hatha yoga in the Western world. Developed by B. K. S. Iyengar, the focus of this discipline is precision in performance while concentrating on improving injuries and structural imbalances. Due to the emphasis on detail, refined movements, and precise muscular and skeletal alignment, the pace of an Iyengar class tends to be slower than other schools of yoga and consists of a fewer number of asanas. Breathing exercises are practiced, but not emphasized as in other styles. Props such as straps, blankets and wooden blocks are commonly used to attain enhanced symmetry and lengthening of the body while offering more freedom to breathe deeply into a pose.

Less concerned with the structural detail of the postures, Kripalu yoga has been described as "meditation in motion." This gentle yet challenging, introspective practice advocates students to observe and release emotional and spiritual blockages through the poses. This inner-directed form of Hatha yoga consists of 3 stages. The first stage, called willful practice, focuses on postural alignment and coordination of breath and movement. This stage is followed by willful surrender in which postures are held for prolonged periods while expanding on the release of emotion and surrendering into the pose. The third and final stage, surrendering to the body's wisdom, is complete freedom of internal tensions, trust in the body's wisdom, and deep meditation throughout movement. Students at this stage are encouraged to explore spontaneous postures guided by the body's internal awareness.

Kundalini yoga is designed to stimulate the nervous system and leave the mind feeling sharp and alive. Through the use of breath, posture, chanting and meditation, "Kundalini" energy, which is believed to be at the base of the spine, is stimulated. This energy is consciously directed and drawn upward through the central energy channel to all seven Chakras (energy centers along the spine) allowing the body to feel rejuvenated and energized. Several breathing techniques are emphasized such as alternate nostril breathing; slow, diaphragmatic breathing;

and a dynamic technique called breath of fire.

Sivananda yoga embraces a five-point philosophy, which includes proper exercise, breathing, deep relaxation, vegetarian diet, positive thinking and meditation. This type of yoga is designed to appreciate and draw together all levels of human experience such as intellect, heart, body, and mind. Following a standard format, Sivananda Hatha yoga classes include a series of twelve postures, the Sun Salutation sequence, breathing exercises, relaxation, and finally, mantra chanting.

The method of Viniyoga is an empowering and transformative practice created by Sri T. Krishnamacharaya. Based on the principle of "sequential process," or vinyasa-krama, Viniyoga poses are synchronized to move with the pace of the breath so that inhalations and exhalations are articulated in varying lengths and ratios. It is a gentle style in which individual needs and capabilities are considered more important than form and execution. Postures are tailored to the physical needs and limitations of each student, taking into account body type, emotional needs, cultural heritage, and interest.

Yoga's greatest gift is teaching us to listen to our body and attune to its deep wisdom. This is called mindfulness or awareness. Achieving this awareness unites the body and mind connecting us to an internal reality that is profound, serene, and peaceful. This reality creates a deep understanding of all aspects of our being.

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